

Narratives of Teachers' Experiences of Cultural Violence in South African Farm Schools

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Abstract

Cultural violence is often overlooked in studies of school violence, yet it legitimises and sustains both direct and structural violence in schools. This paper draws on Johan Galtung's violence triangle to examine how cultural violence shapes everyday interactions, authority relations, and teachers' professional positioning in South African farm schools. Farm schools in South Africa reflect historically entrenched hierarchies shaped by colonialism, apartheid, patriarchy, and class, which continue to inform schooling realities. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the study employs narrative inquiry. Four teachers were purposively selected to participate in focus group interviews to narrate their experiences of cultural violence. Narrative analysis revealed that teachers experience cultural violence through the demonisation of cultural belief systems, weaponised language, gendered intimidation, ritualised apologies, and sexualised insults. These practices operate as forms of symbolic aggression that undermine teachers' authority and pedagogical practices while legitimising direct and structural violence. This paper demonstrates how cultural violence within micro-level educational interactions functions to legitimise and normalise violence in everyday school life.

Keywords:

School violence, narrative inquiry, cultural violence, structural violence, farm school

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Introduction and Background

This paper draws on the seminal work of Johan Galtung (1969, 1990) to examine how cultural violence operates as a legitimising force that normalises and sustains both direct and structural violence in South African farm schools. The paper is located within a larger research project conducted by Shabangu (2021), which documented three interrelated forms of school violence: direct, structural, and cultural violence in South African farm schools in Mpumalanga Province. However, the focus of the current paper is to report specifically on the manifestations of cultural violence. For Galtung (1990), cultural violence can be understood as those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence, exemplified by religion, ideology, language and art, empirical and formal science, that can be used to legitimise direct and structural violence. It is significant to accentuate that these are aspects of culture rather than entire cultures. For instance, Galtung (1990) exemplifies that “a person encouraging a potential killer, shouting 'Killing is self-realisation!', may prove that the English language is equally capable of expressing such thoughts. However, not that the English language as such is violent”. In line with Galtung’s logic, this paper does not posit that any cultural group is violent. However, it examines how specific aspects of cultural narratives legitimise harmful behaviours and reproduce inequitable relations in farm schools. South African farm schools are characterised by historically entrenched hierarchies shaped by colonialism, apartheid, patriarchy, and class, which continue to shape contemporary realities in farm schools (Chetty, 2003). Farm schools in South Africa are located on privately owned land and continue to reflect these historical inequalities (Shabangu, 2025). Colonialism and apartheid policies sought to confine Black rural populations to farms and reserves, providing minimal education designed to produce a subservient labour force for white agricultural capitalists (Christie & Gaganakis, 1989). This was reinforced through a broader discriminatory legislative framework, including land dispossession, segregationist policies, and the institutionalisation of unequal education. The Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 entrenched a system in which Black learners were intentionally trained for manual labour and subordinate roles. The Act

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also ensured that Black schools, predominantly located in townships, rural, and farm areas, were deliberately underfunded as a method of maintaining inequality (Cameron, 1986). In this way, education was instrumentalised to reinforce white supremacy within an agricultural capitalist system (Tischler, 2016; Christie & Gaganakis, 1989). These historical arrangements continue to shape contemporary educational inequalities. This is reflected in the persistent privileging of historically advantaged urban schools and the systematic disadvantaging of rural and farm-based communities (Bantwini & Feza, 2017; Shabangu & Jita, 2025). As a result, in post-apartheid South Africa, farm schools continue to be structurally predisposed to violence (Shabangu, 2025). Galtung (1969) broadly conceptualises violence, extending beyond physical harm to include social conditions that limit individuals' capacity to realise their full potential. From this perspective, deprivation, inequality, and institutional neglect constitute forms of structural violence embedded within unequal social arrangements. Within this context, cultural violence becomes central in sustaining these inequalities. These inequalities are reproduced through cultural narratives that normalise harm and injustice by valorising obedience, discipline, and deference, thereby masking structural inequality and deprivation. Despite its significant role in justifying direct and structural violence, cultural violence remains underexplored within South African scholarship on school violence. Existing studies, such as Mthiyane (2013), Dlungwane (2018), Chitsamatanga and Rembe (2020), and Matemane and Chauke (2025), have predominantly focused on direct manifestations of school violence such as physical assault, intimidation, verbal abuse, cyberbullying, and gender-based violence. In doing so, they tend to frame learner recalcitrant behaviour as a matter of disciplinary breakdown. Such a framing overlooks the role of cultural narratives in reproducing and sustaining school violence. To address this gap, this paper draws on teachers' narratives shared during a focus group interview. The aim of this paper is to examine how cultural violence operates as a normalised force within farm school contexts. In this paper, I argue that teachers' experiences of direct and structural violence are not isolated incidents, but are rooted in deeper cultural logics that legitimise inequality and undermine professional authority within marginalised educational settings. By foregrounding teachers' narratives, the paper demonstrates how cultural violence legitimises

direct and structural violence and contributes to the reproduction of systemic educational inequalities in farm schools.

Cultural violence

Cultural violence, as theorised by Johan Galtung, explicates why some harmful practices in schools are seen as normal, necessary, or even educational, rather than as violence (Galtung, 1990). This framing extends violence beyond visible acts such as fights and bullying. It includes the beliefs, routines, and school traditions that make unequal treatment and exclusion appear natural (Guilherme, 2017; Guilherme, 2021). In this sense, cultural violence is not simply present alongside direct and structural violence; it performs a legitimising function that shapes what is considered acceptable and obscures harm in everyday school practices (Galtung, 1990). In educational settings, this legitimising function is evident in taken-for-granted ideas about which learners are “gifted,” “dangerous,” or “difficult,” and whose language, race, gender, or disability is constructed as a “problem” (Sgouropoulou et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2009). Cultural violence underpins these processes through stereotypes, honour cultures, meritocracy myths, and deficit views that render inequality both intelligible and justified (Waldron, 2009; Hughes, 2019). Through this process of misrecognition, unequal relations are normalised and become part of school culture. Thereby leading teachers and learners who are othered to lose safety and opportunities while often blaming themselves (Krajewski et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2009). Focusing only on visible incidents obscures the deeper cultural conditions that produce and sustain school violence (Guilherme, 2021). Thus, addressing cultural violence requires critically examining school norms, curricula, and discipline as means of transforming the conditions that make such violence possible (McMahon et al., 2025; Soriano et al., 1994; Borges & Branco, 2019; Dhungana, 2020).

The nexus between Cultural, Structural, and Direct violence in the South African context

The intersection between cultural, structural, and direct violence is best understood as a mutually reinforcing relationship (Galtung, 1969, 1990). Direct violence is

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visible acts of intentional harm to a person (Galtung, 1969), while structural violence encompasses systemic inequalities that constrain access to resources, rights, and opportunities (Burnett, 1998; Farmer et al., 2006). As noted, cultural violence operates through ideology, language, religion, and other symbolic dimensions that justify and normalise both direct and structural violence, making them socially and morally acceptable (Galtung, 1990; Dhikale & Vadjé, 2024; Dutta et al., 2016). Apartheid South Africa illustrates this nexus clearly. Ideology, language, and symbols were used to justify racial oppression, while laws and institutions enforced it. Legislative frameworks such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Land Act of 1913, and the Group Areas Act of 1950 entrenched inequality by limiting access to education, land, and political power (Hadfield, 2024; Forde et al., 2021). Segregation signs, passbooks, separate schools and facilities, apartheid flags, propaganda imagery, and police uniforms reinforced racial hierarchy and state authority. These cultural and institutional mechanisms sustained both direct and structural violence over generations. Structural violence persisted through poverty, spatial segregation, and unequal access to opportunities, while cultural violence provided the ideological justification that made such inequality appear natural. This interaction demonstrates how cultural violence underpins systemic harm by normalising exclusion and masking injustice. In contemporary contexts, cultural violence continues to manifest in school values, traditions, and stereotypes (Hoosen et al., 2022). Gender norms, racial biases, and the valorisation of aggressive masculinity make discriminatory practices appear normal (Mshweshwe, 2020; Blanco-Pardo et al., 2025). These cultural beliefs underpin structural violence in school policies such as rigid hierarchies, punitive discipline, and exclusionary practices. Without addressing these cultural norms, interventions on issues such as gender-based school violence risk remaining superficial and temporary. Studying cultural violence, therefore, advances social justice and inclusion by exposing how educational practices may unintentionally legitimise oppression. As Kennedy et al. (2024) argue, this enables deeper interrogation of curricula, policies, and classroom practices. Recognising cultural violence alongside direct and structural forms enables transformative interventions rather than merely responsive

ones, contributing to the creation of cultures of peace in educational institutions (Kennedy et al., 2024).

Methodology

I adopted an interpretivist paradigm to explore teachers' experiences of cultural violence and its implications for teaching and learning. The interpretivist approach focuses on understanding how cultural norms, beliefs, and symbolic practices shape teachers' experiences and interactions within school contexts (Alhoussawi, 2023). Guided by this paradigm, the study examined how teachers' lived experiences of cultural violence justify direct and structural violence in South African farm schools. In keeping up with the interpretivism paradigm. I employed a narrative inquiry, a qualitative research approach. Narrative inquiry explores lived experiences over time and within specific social, political, and cultural contexts (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). It centres participants' voices, allowing them to construct counter-narratives that challenge marginalisation and violence. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, humans live storied lives, and narrative inquiry enables an understanding of how individuals make meaning of their experiences and envision more peaceful futures. Four teachers were purposively selected from three primary schools and one secondary school located in the farmlands of the Mashishing Circuit, Bohlabela District, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. Data were collected through focus group interviews, which created a platform for teachers to collectively reflect on their experiences of cultural violence. These teachers were regarded as information-rich cases, given that their experiences of school violence provide insight into the research questions (Emmel, 2013). As part of ethical considerations, I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants and ensure confidentiality: Ntokozo, Zonke, Thandeka, and Zanele. For data analysis, I used narrative analysis to organise and interpret teachers' textual data into coherent narratives of their experiences in farm schools (Polkinghorne, 2002). These narratives were then re-storied by the researcher to highlight patterns and insights while preserving participants' perspectives (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the analysis was grounded in participants' voices while maintaining transparency and accountability (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Findings and Discussion

Below, I present the narratives of teachers' experiences of cultural violence. In reflecting on these experiences, Johan Galtung (1990) reminds us that cultural violence encompasses aspects of culture, such as language, religion, tradition, values, education, social norms, symbols, and rituals, that are used to justify, legitimate, and normalise direct and structural violence. In this study, cultural violence is closely intertwined with direct and structural violence. It manifests not only through interpersonal interactions but also through institutional practices and societal norms that legitimise disrespect and marginalisation. Teachers' experiences highlight that acts such as humiliation through nicknaming, demonisation of ritual practices, ridicule, exclusion, misrepresentation of cultural practices, and sexualised insults form part of a broader systemic pattern that undermines teachers' authority and erodes their dignity.

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Demonisation of Cultural Belief Systems

Zonke is an experienced male teacher with over two decades of service in the teaching profession. He plays a significant role in the school's extracurricular programme, particularly in the music choir, where he has successfully led learners to win multiple district music competitions. Despite these achievements, Zonke perceives a lack of support from the school principal for music-related activities. This perceived neglect has contributed to a strained, adversarial relationship between them, shaping his experiences in the school environment.

On a certain weekend, I had to go home to perform some rituals according to my beliefs. We slaughtered a goat, and I had to wear isiphandla as a symbol of my connection with my ancestors. On my return, I met my principal, and he poked isiphandla, saying, 'You went home to do buloyi [witchcraft] for me; you think you will overthrow me. You won't succeed. You are just a small boy. I was angered by his provocative words.

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In this narrative, Zonke shares a sensitive experience in which the principal's comments reduce Isiphandla, a culturally significant marker of ancestral connection, to ubuloyi (witchcraft). Isiphandla is traditionally extracted from the skin of a specific part of a slaughtered goat. It symbolises that a family ritual, such as a birth, death, or cleansing ceremony, has been performed. Its preparation is entrusted to a designated family member, reflecting its regulated cultural and spiritual significance. It is worn on either wrist, depending on the ritual observed. The principal's interpretation of this practice as witchcraft constitutes cultural violence as it redefines a legitimate cultural symbol as suspicious and illegitimate. This framing draws on colonial and missionary discourses that historically positioned African Traditional Religion (ATR) as inferior and dangerous (Mokhoathi, 2017). In this context, indigenous belief systems are symbolically devalued, and cultural difference is rendered incompatible with institutional authority. This cultural framing operates as a form of symbolic power that enables marginalisation within the school space. Thereby legitimising exclusion and disrespect. It is within this interpretive frame that direct violence emerges. The principal accuses Zonke of plotting against him and labels him a "small boy who performs witchcraft." This constitutes psychological violence, where cultural misrecognition becomes the basis for humiliation and intimidation. The cultural framing of Isiphandla as witchcraft thus enables and justifies the verbal aggression directed at Zonke. Given the principal's institutional authority. Such an interaction also reflects structural injustices that reinforce unequal power relations, constraining Zonke's ability to participate safely and fully within the school environment. It can therefore be argued that cultural identity is tolerated only when it aligns with dominant institutional norms. This ultimately renders alternative cultural practices professionally suspect. In this way, cultural violence contributes to the normalisation of both direct and structural violence by legitimising suspicion and undermining Zonke's cultural and professional legitimacy.

Humiliation through nicknaming

Ntokozo is a male teacher with less than five years of teaching experience. He is teaching in an area where he grew up, and learners

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often use his childhood negative nickname to undermine his professional identity, accompanied by laughter and peer reinforcement:

“Learners made those funny comments and even went to the extent of calling me by my nickname while other learners were laughing. They called me by my nickname mainly because I was teaching in an area where I grew up.”

Research shows that humour in the classroom can build rapport, reduce tension, and create a more engaging environment for both learners and teachers (Şahin, 2021; Bakar & Mallan, 2023). Within these interactional dynamics, nicknames function as informal identities shaped by culture, language, gender, family, community, and context (Carranza-Pinedo, 2024). Although nicknames may be positive or playful. Learners may also use sarcasm, teasing, and nicknaming to assert group dynamics and resist authority (Burger, 2022). When persistent and demeaning, however, such practices move beyond humour and become harmful, particularly when they target a teacher’s identity, authority, and sense of belonging (Nkuna et al., 2025). In Ntokozo’s narrative, learners used a negative nickname to demean him. Negative nicknames often function as instruments of criticism, disapproval, and social control (Matfunjwa et al., 2024). Some are linked to physical appearance or perceived abnormalities, including body shape, skin colour, and other visible traits (Mambwe et al., 2024). Within school contexts, such practices become culturally intelligible when they are repeated and left unchallenged. In this instance, the nickname symbolically undermines Ntokozo’s professional identity and erodes the boundaries between teacher authority and peer-level familiarity. What may appear playful, it carries deeper implications for how respect and legitimacy are negotiated within the school environment. As Andersen and Winding (2025) argue, teasing and nicknaming may become forms of symbolic and psychosocial violence when used to shame and undermine others. In this sense, the repeated use of derogatory nicknames reflects cultural violence insofar as it normalises disrespect toward teachers through everyday interaction. When tolerated institutionally, such practices may also lower the threshold for direct forms of aggression, including verbal intimidation and bullying. Over time, this contributes to structural inequalities in

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which certain teachers, particularly those from local communities, experience heightened exposure to disrespect and diminished professional legitimacy. Negative nicknaming thus becomes more than interpersonal teasing; it operates as a socially embedded practice through which exclusion, unequal power relations, and violence are reproduced within school spaces.

The Weaponisation of Language and Gendered Intimidation

Thandeka is a novice female teacher who recently graduated from university and has less than two years of teaching experience. Since joining the teaching profession, she has reported several incidents in which predominantly male learners refuse to comply with her instructions. She interprets these patterns of noncompliance as targeted, attributing them to her age and gender, as she is younger than most teachers at the school.

There was this Grade 6 boy who was taller than me in height. A couple of days ago, I gave the class an assignment to complete, and I asked those who had not finished it to step forward. He, along with his friends, was among the learners who did not complete the task. As a punishment, they were supposed to dust off all the desks on the following day. He blatantly said he would not do it, and there was nothing I could do about it. I then told him to follow me to the principal's office. We went there, and I informed the principal of what was happening and left him there. When he came back to class, he spoke in Sepedi, which he knew was foreign to me. When he told his friends, they all started laughing, but the rest of the class was shocked and looked at me. I asked them what he said, and they said to me that he was calling me by my private part and he was going to smack me. It took me by great surprise, and I was a bit scared, so I told him to leave my class. He stood up and walked towards me - I almost peed myself - but his friends held him.

Thandeka's narrative illustrates how gender, age, language, and institutional power intersect to shape her vulnerability to violence within the classroom. As a novice female teacher with less than two years of teaching experience. Thandeka shares repeated incidents of

non-compliance with instructions from predominantly male learners. She interprets these experiences as linked to her age and gender. Broadly, these experiences reflect patriarchal norms that position authority and discipline as masculine attributes, thereby undermining the legitimacy of young female teachers (Tarabulus & Yablon, 2022; Nako & Muthukrishna, 2018). The Grade 6 learner's assertion that there is "nothing [she] could do" demonstrates how these assumptions are enacted within classroom interaction. Shah (2021) similarly notes that female teachers in patriarchal contexts frequently encounter resistance to their authority. Stemming from male learners who may position themselves as natural leaders. In such a situation, language also becomes a mechanism for enacting exclusion and dominance. The learner's use of Sepedi, a language inaccessible to Thandeka, limits communication and reinforces unequal power relations within the interaction. In a multilingual society such as South Africa, where teachers may not share all learners' linguistic repertoires. Language practices may shape classroom inclusion and exclusion (Masunungure & Maguvhe, 2025). These dynamics are intensified through sexualised verbal remarks directed at Thandeka. For Taylor (2021), such utterances reflect broader social norms that humiliate and police women's bodies. Such practices normalise sexual humiliation and contribute to an environment in which aggression toward female teachers becomes more permissible. This environment may enable direct violence through verbal sexual harassment, intimidation, and threats of physical harm. As noted in the learner's statement that he would "smack" her, and his threatening physical posturing. Although the incident was reported to school leadership, the absence of sustained disciplinary intervention contributed to the continuation of harmful behaviour. Over time, such institutional failures may reinforce unequal working conditions and leave novice female teachers vulnerable to ongoing aggression within the school environment.

Gendered Power, Linguistic Exclusion, and Teacher Intimidation

Zanele is a young female teacher with less than three years of teaching experience, currently teaching Consumer Studies at a secondary school. She entered the profession with a strong desire to teach in an environment where learners value education and where relationships

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between learners and teachers are characterised by mutual respect, regardless of gender and language.

Nalesilungu osikhulumayo asisizwa kumele ufundise ngesizulu manje noma uphume ke okungcono (“We don’t understand even the English language you are speaking, you must teach us in IsiZulu, or you must leave the class.”) “One of the big boys stood up and came straight to me. He stared me in the eye ... told me to leave the class, or else he would kick me out of the class.”

In this narrative, Zanele shares an incident that illustrates how school violence emerges through interconnected cultural, interactional, and structural dimensions. From a Galtungian perspective, cultural violence justifies harmful practices by embedding them within shared beliefs and social norms that render them acceptable (Galtung, 1990). In this case, the learners’ insistence that the teacher must teach in IsiZulu or leave the classroom reflects a form of linguistic entitlement shaped by broader ideas of language, identity, and belonging. While mother-tongue instruction is widely recognised as a legitimate pedagogical and equity concern (Stoop, 2017; Moganedi et al., 2025). Its invocation here serves less as a call for inclusion than as a challenge to the teacher’s legitimacy in the classroom. At the interactional level, language becomes a mechanism through which authority is contested and exclusion enacted. The demand for IsiZulu is not merely a linguistic preference but a symbolic act that destabilises the teacher’s professional position. Research demonstrates that language often reflects and reproduces gendered power relations, with masculinity frequently positioned as dominant within social interaction (Ombongi et al., 2024; Babayeva, 2023). In this context, the learner’s confrontation and defiance toward a young female teacher reflect broader social expectations surrounding gender and authority. The escalation from verbal resistance to threatening physical posturing further demonstrates how intimidation may be used to assert dominance within classroom interaction (Witkower et al., 2023; Carney, 2020). At the structural level, the collective nature of the disruption suggests that the behaviour is socially reinforced rather than merely individual misconduct. As Gelfand et al. (2024) argue, collective disruption is shaped by shared group dynamics and expectations. When such conduct is not effectively addressed through institutional intervention, it risks becoming

normalised within school culture. In this way, peer reinforcement and institutional inaction contribute to conditions that sustain aggression and weaken teacher authority within the school environment.

A ritualised apology

“Even though learners had apologised, I could see that this was a forced apology.” “After the incident, I was ordered to go back to class and teach.”

In this narrative, Zanele observes that, “Even though learners had apologised, I could see that this was a forced apology.” This indicates a lack of genuine accountability, as apologies often function as administrative tools to restore order rather than address harm. Friedrich (2022) avers that forced apologies depoliticise harm, producing an appearance of resolution while leaving underlying power relations unchanged. Without behavioural change, acknowledgement of harm, or structural intervention, apologies risk reinforcing existing hierarchies and maintaining the status quo (Thobani, 2024). Tarusarira (2019) and Friedrich (2022) argue that meaningful apologies require truth-telling, reparative action, and transformation of the conditions that enabled harm. However, the instruction for Zanele to “go back to class and teach” prioritised institutional normalcy over teacher safety and dignity. By requiring her to resume teaching without changes in learner behaviour. It can be argued that the school minimised the severity of the incident and restored learner authority in the classroom. This stabilised rather than disrupted the power relations that enabled the harm. As such, it positions the teacher as responsible for maintaining continuity despite unresolved risk. In this way, such apologies risk becoming complicit in cultural and symbolic violence by reproducing the conditions that allowed the harm (Tarusarira, 2019). The ritualised apology and return-to-class instruction further reflect structural injustices. Wherein, institutional routines prioritise instructional continuity over safety and shift responsibility onto the teacher. By treating the apology as sufficient, the school normalises the threat and fails to address the underlying power imbalance. Structural violence thus operates through routine institutional practices that tacitly legitimise learner aggression (Matusov & Sullivan, 2019).

Conclusion

These narratives show that cultural violence in schools legitimises direct and structural violence by undermining teacher authority and normalising aggressive learner behaviour. Such dynamics are produced through everyday interactions that reflect broader relations of power within schooling contexts, rendering violence a routine feature of school life. A key contribution of this study is that cultural violence operates not only through broader social and historical discourses but also through classroom interactions in which authority, gender, language, and identity are negotiated. The study extends Johan Galtung's notion of cultural violence by showing how symbolic forms of harm become embedded in routine educational practices, making violence appear acceptable and often invisible within school life. The findings further show that teachers, particularly novice and culturally marginalised teachers, experience violence as the erosion of dignity, legitimacy, and professional authority. Cultural violence, therefore, shapes the conditions under which teachers teach and interact within schools. Addressing these dynamics requires engagement with the assumptions, norms, and power relations that sustain exclusion, disrespect, and inequality within educational spaces. From a positive peacebuilding perspective, the findings highlight the importance of school cultures grounded in a policy position that advances dialogue, accountability, recognition, and relational justice. Positive peace refers not merely to the absence of overt violence, but to conditions that support dignity, inclusion, mutual respect, and constructive engagement. Restorative justice offers a framework for addressing harm through dialogue, relationship repair, and collective accountability rather than exclusion and punishment. Alongside this, mentorship, psychosocial support, intercultural competence, and responsive institutional practices may strengthen trust and relational well-being within school communities. The study demonstrates that addressing school violence requires confronting the cultural meanings and institutional practices through which violence is normalised and legitimised. In this sense, addressing cultural violence is essential not only for violence prevention but also for inculcating a more just and peaceful school ecology.

Ethical considerations

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